

Synonymy in Arabic: Illusion and Reality¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the phenomenon of synonymy in natural languages, with a special reference to Arabic. In addition, it explicates the views of both ancient and modern linguists and philologists concerning such a phenomenon. Some of them, like Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Razī (d. 478/1085), Al-Zajjāj (d. 310/922) and Al-Fayrūzabādī (d. 817/1415), argue for the existence of synonymy, and others, like Abū Helāl Al-‘Askarī (d. 395/1005), Ahmad ibn Faris (d. 395/1004) and Al-Tha’ālebī (d. 429/1038), reject the existence of synonymy. Obviously, the phenomenon of synonymy divided linguists and scholars into two groups, namely proponents, who defended synonymy and argued for its occurrence in languages, in general, on one hand, and opponents, who denied its existence in general, and in the Holy Qur’ān in particular, like Al-Khattabī (d. 388/988) and Bint Al-Shāti? (d. 1419/1998), on the other hand.

0. Introduction

1. Definition of Synonymy

Synonymy means that two or more lexical items can be interchangeably used without affecting the intended meaning of the text in which they occur. In other words, it can be defined as “symmetric hyponymy” (Palmer, 1996: 88). It is a kind of semantic relation in which two lexical items are synonymous if they have the same meaning.

Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms defines the concept of synonym at length, as follows:

A synonym, in this dictionary, will always mean one of two or more words in the English language, which have the same or very nearly the same essential meaning.... Synonyms, therefore, are only such words as may be defined wholly, or almost wholly, in the same terms. Usually, they are distinguished from one another by an added implication or connotation, or they may differ in their idiomatic use or in their application.

In *WordNet-Online Dictionary*, synonymy is defined as follows: “The semantic relation that holds between two words that can (in a given context) express the same meaning.” In other words, two words are synonymous if, they are mutually interchangeable in a particular context.

¹ This paper is excerpted, with some slight modifications, from an MA thesis entitled *The Rendering of a Selected Sample of Synonyms in Three Major Translations of the Glorious Qur’an: A Semantic Approach* (2008), under the supervision of the late Professor Muhammad Yahya and Prof. Khaled Tawfiq, Cairo University. In 2011, this thesis was published under the title of *Synonymy in the Glorious Qur’an: Problems Explored & Strategies Adopted*, by VDM Verlag, Germany.

Given the abovementioned definition, it thus appears that synonymous words are not completely similar, but, on the contrary, they have “the same or nearly the same essential meaning” (*Webster's New Dictionary*). Thus, whether they are similar or nearly similar, they differ in “connotation, application, or idiomatic use” (ibid.).

Thus, it can be argued that full synonymy is rare, if not impossible, because it is difficult to encounter words with identical definition. In this regard, Palmer (1996) believes that “there are no total synonyms” and “no two words have exactly the same meaning” (91).

The ancient Arab linguist, Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Razī (d. 478/1085), defines synonymy as “single words indicating one thing with one meaning” (Al-Suyūfī, *Al-Muzhir* 1: 403).

In other words, synonymy means sameness of meaning and difference in form. For example, the ancient Arab linguist, Al-Fayrūzabādī (d. 817/1415), in his well-known Arabic book entitled *Al-Rawḍ Al-Maslūf Fī Ma Lahū Ismān Ila Ulūf*, tackles the issue of synonymy. He further says: “Honey has eighty substantives, such as العسل, الضرب, الضربة, الضريب, الشؤب, الذؤب, الحميت, الحميت, الأزي, الإذواب, etc.” (ibid., 1: 407).

2. The Phenomenon of Synonymy

The issue of synonymy is a controversial and problematic one; it appears to have obsessed the minds of the ancient and modern linguists; some of them defended and argued for the existence of synonymy whereas others rejected it.

'A'ishah 'Abdel-Rahmān (2004), known as Bint Al-Shāṭi', expresses her opinion regarding this issue; she emphasizes that many scholars dealt with the phenomenon of synonymy a long time ago, and it still occupies the minds of other modern linguists at the present time. In this regard, she says:

Many years ago, the issue of synonymy obsessed the (minds) of the Arab linguists, who divided over it. In this regard, the Holy Qur'ān gives a sound judgment regarding whatever they differed on as It guides (the reader) towards the proper meaning of the (right) word that cannot be replaced by another alleged synonym.¹
(209) (Translation is mine)

Also, 'Abdel-'Āl Salem (2001) believes that all linguists define the phenomenon of synonymy as difference in phonological forms but sameness in meaning (58). It thus appears that synonymy is defined as two lexical items that have similar meanings but significantly differ in the morphological features of the two words (ibid 60).

Moreover, Salem (2001: 16-17) believes that the phenomenon of synonymy vividly imposes itself for some certain reasons, as follows:

- 1- The different languages and dialects of the Arabs; for example, some of them name السكين (knife) as سكين and the other name it as المدية.
- 2- People did not attribute all that they had conveyed in their daily communication to their tribes; for example, they used to mention some and neglect the others. Thus, difference in dialects was one of the most crucial reasons that led to the emergence of such a phenomenon.
- 3- Some ancient linguists attribute the existence of synonymy in language to the following reason:

One of two tribes opts for one of two substantives that have the same meaning, and the other tribe independently, the other one, and then the two (words) become commonly used... as languages are idiomatic.²

(Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muzhir* 1: 405-06) (Translation is mine)

- 4- The plenty of lexis is a proof of the liveliness of the Arabic language. Sometimes one may prefer one of two words or expressions to the other that is difficult to articulate. Moreover, (daily) communication depends upon choosing easy words. Thus, the freedom of choice results from multiple words that have an identical meaning.
- 5- Some ancient scholars believe that synonymy has some characteristics, such as "the multiple ways or methods by which one can express whatever s/he likes; (as a result of such multiplicity), one may forget one of two (synonymous) words or avoid articulating difficult words" (Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Muzhir* 1: 406).

Regarding the richness of synonyms, Palmer (1996) mentions the reason why English abounds in them; he focuses on two reasons, as follows:

- 1- Its vocabulary came from two different sources, i.e. Anglo-Saxon on the one hand and French, Latin and Greek on the other.
- 2- Interaction between languages and communication between people led to the emergence of new words; for example, the following pairs seem to be semantically related such as 'brotherly' and 'fraternal', 'buy' and 'purchase', 'world' and 'universe', 'kingly', 'royal' and 'regal', etc.

Kingly	Royal	Regal
↓	↓	↓
Anglo-Saxon	French	Latin

(Palmer 88-89)

3. Kinds of Sameness

According to Roy Harris (1973: 11), there are four kinds of sameness, as follows:

- 1- The pairs (two synonymous words or expressions) may appear in the same position, e.g. 'It is the same **chair**'.
- 2- The pairs may be a repetition of previous actions, e.g. 'It is the same dance **step**'.
- 3- The pairs may be two or more coexistent copies of one thing, e.g. 'It is the same **newspaper**'.
- 4- Two continuous things are the same in a given respect, e.g. 'He has the same **eye** as his father'.

4. Types of Synonymy

According to linguists, there are various kinds of synonymy. Some of them, like O. Ducháčěk (1964: 14-17), divide synonyms into three kinds, as follows:

- 1- 'Perfect synonyms'
- 2- 'Approximate synonyms'
- 3- 'Words semantically related'

Other scholars, like Abraham and Kiefer (1966), divide synonymy into two kinds, as follows:

- 'full'
- 'less-than-full'

Antar Sulhī (2003) defines 'perfect' or 'full' synonyms as "words that share exactly the same meaning, [but they] do not exist, or if they do, they are exceedingly rare" (14).

In this regard, Ahmad Mukhtār 'Umar (2001: 227-28) denies the existence of full synonymy. He rather absolutely rejects the occurrence of synonymy. According to him, there are no two interchangeable expressions in all contexts, but, on the contrary, there are some slight differences between them, namely semantically, stylistically and psychologically. In addition, his argument is based upon the fact that full synonymy does not exist since there are no two items that can be looked at as one item, or on one linguistic level, or during one period of time, or among the people of one tribe (ibid.).

There is also another type of synonymy, i.e. absolute synonymy, which does not exist in language, according to T. Vasudevan (1996). This type means that two items have the same meaning and can be mutually used in all contexts without limits.

Another type of synonymy is called near-synonymy. According to Taylor (2003), near-synonyms are "words which are similar in meaning, which tend not to be contrastive, but which are distributed differently" (1).

Similarly, Al-Khattabī (d. 388/988: 26), an ancient Arab linguist, argues for the existence of words that are similar in meaning, but he blames those people who believe that words, such as العلم/المعرفة/الحمد, الشكر/الحمد, and البخل/الشح, are functionally equal.

On the other hand, Al-Keya, believes that semantically related words are divided into متواردة (polysemous) words and مترادفة (synonymous) words. As for the former, he defines it as "one substantive that has various names." For example, الخمر (wine) is called عُقَار, صَهْبَاء and قَهْوَة, and السبع (wild beast of prey) is called أُسَد, لَيْث and صَبْرُغَام. As for the latter, he defines it as "two words of similar meanings that are interchangeably used" (Al-Suyūfī 1: 406-07).

5. Controversy over Synonymy

To begin with, it is argued that synonymy is "a very puzzling phenomenon" (Taylor, *Near Synonyms* 1). In the past, it divided many scholars into two groups; one group argued for the existence of synonymy whereas the other argued against it. In this regard, discussing polysemy, that is, multiplicity of meaning, is not as problematic and controversial as synonymy because the majority of linguists unanimously admit the existence of polysemy, except for the ancient Arab linguist, Ibn Durstūwayh (d. 347/958) and some modernist scholars. According to Sulhī (2003), "In polysemy, a single phonological form is associated with two or more distinct semantic values. (But) in synonymy, a single meaning is symbolized by two or more distinct phonological forms" (14).

As for the phenomenon of synonymy at hand, it has aroused and caused great controversy and severe argument amongst scholars, namely ancient and modern. Furthermore, it became very difficult to compromise opinions and/or to settle their disputes (Salem 9). Thus, some light needs to be shed upon the views of both those who defend the existence of synonymy and those who reject it in language.

Some of the ancient scholars, like Al-Fayrūzabādī (d. 817/1415), the famous ancient Arab linguist and the author of *Al-Qamūs Al-Muhīt*, (the ocean dictionary) admitted the existence of synonymous words. On the other hand, other ancient linguists, such

as Abū Maṣṣūr Al-Tha'alebī (d. 429/1038), who wrote a famous book entitled *Fiqh Al-Lughah Wa Asrar Al-'Arabeyah* (philology and the secrets of Arabic), and Abū Helāl Al-'Askarī (d. 395/1005), the author of one of the most popular books in Arabic entitled *Al-Furūq Al-Lughaweyah* (linguistic differences), reject the existence of synonymy. In their books, they distinguish between alleged synonyms, such as الحمد/الشكر، الفؤاد/القلب، السر/النجوى، الصفح/العفو/المغفرة etc. In addition, they emphasize that the words mentioned in their books are not synonymous, but they are approximate synonyms, and there are some shared shades of meaning among them.

For example, in *Mufradāt Alfadh Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm* (lexis of the Glorious Qur'ān), Al-Aṣfahanī (d. 502/1108) differentiates between ريب and شك. He defines them, as follows:

- فالريب: أن تتوهم بالشيء أمرا ما، فينكشف عما تتوهمه، قال تعالى: ﴿يا أيها الناس إن كنتم في ريب من البعث﴾ [الحج/5]، ﴿وإن كنتم في ريب مما نزلنا على عبدنا﴾ [البقرة/23]، تنبيهها أن لا ريب فيه، وقوله: ﴿ريب المنون﴾ [الطور/30]، سماه ريبا لا أنه مشكك في كونه، بل من حيث تشكك في وقت حصوله، فالإنسان أبدا في ريب المنون من جهة وقته، لا من جهة كونه. (579)

- الشك: اعتدال النقيضين عند الإنسان وتساويهما، وذلك قد يكون لوجود أمارتين متساويتين عند النقيضين، أو لعدم الأمانة فيهما، والشك ربما كان في الشيء هل هو موجود أو غير موجود؟ وربما كان في جنسه، من أي جنس هو؟ وربما كان في بعض صفاته، وربما كان في الغرض الذي لأجله أوجد. والشك: ضرب من الجهل، وهو أخص منه؛ لأن الجهل قد يكون عدم العلم بالنقيضين رأسا، فكل شك جهل، وليس كل جهل شك، قال الله تعالى: ﴿وإنهم لفي شك منه مريب﴾ [هود/110]. (749)

In Arabic, this distinction between الريب and الشك may not exist in ordinary dictionaries, except the specialized and large ones, such as *Al-Furūq Al-Lughaweyah* (linguistic differences) by Al-'Askarī (d. 395/1005), *Fiqh Al-Lughah* (philology and the secrets of Arabic) by Al-Tha'alebī (d. 429/1038).

In English, such a distinction between the two words is not very clear. For example, in *Merriam-Webster*, the word *doubt*, the equivalent of الشك, is defined as follows: "Uncertainty of belief or opinion: the subjective state of being uncertain of the truth of a statement or the reality of an event as a result of incomplete knowledge or evidence." But the word *suspicion*, the equivalent of الريب, is defined as follows: "The act or an instance of suspecting: imagination or apprehension of something wrong or hurtful without proof or on slight evidence; the mental uneasiness aroused in one who suspects."

Obviously, the dictionary meaning in Arabic is more comprehensive and inclusive than that in English. Thus, according to some linguists, such as Al-'Askarī (d. 395/1005), some alleged synonyms are not synonymous, but, in fact, they have some subtle nuances of meaning in common.

5.1 Advocates of the Existence of Synonymy

The advocates of synonymy are numerous, both ancient and modern, among them are Al-'Aṣma'ī (d. 216/831), Sibawayeh (d. 180/796), Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Razī (d. 478/1085), Al-Zajjāj (d. 310/922), Ibrahīm Anīs (1965), Ullmann (1962), Brodda and Kargren (1969), Schneidmesser (1980), Vasudevan (1996).

For example, Muḥammad ibn Saleh Al-Shaye' (1993) lists the reasons behind the occurrence of synonymy in Arabic, as follows:

- 1) Arabic language abounds in its plentiful vocabulary that is derived from the same stem.
- 2) As a result of the widespread and common use of adjectives, they became as popular as nouns, e.g. سيف (substantive) and حسام (attribute), meaning 'sword'.
- 3) The different dialects of the Arab tribes and clans, e.g. المديّة and سكنين, meaning 'knife'.

- 4) Foreign and borrowed words that entered the Arabic language, e.g. النرجس and العهبر that stand for 'daffodils'.
- 5) The metaphorical use of words, or what we call in Arabic المجاز *Al-Majaz*, e.g. لغة and لسان stand for 'language'.
- 6) Different pronunciation of the same words according to different dialects, e.g. رزح and زرع, meaning 'to plant or to drop'.

In this regard, Ahmad ibn Faris (d. 395/1004) narrates a simple short story that shows the existence of synonymy in Arabic language; he says:

One day, a man from the tribe of Banu Kelab or Banu 'Amer ibn Sa'sa'ah went to the Yemeni king called Zee Jaden on the roof. On seeing him, the king ordered that man, saying: "ثب" (sit down). The man said: "Surely, I'll do." Then, he jumped down from the roof and died. The king wondered, saying: "What's wrong?" People said: "Oh, Majesty! According to the people of Nazar, 'الوثب' means jumping downward." Thus, the king astonishingly said: "Indeed, our Arabic differs from theirs."³ (Al-Saleh 300) (Translation is mine)

Here, the message or the theme of the previous story is very clear; it shows that the Arabs differ among themselves; each tribe has its own language and dialect that distinguishes it from other tribes. For example, the man misunderstands the speech of the king, although they speak the same language, i.e. Arabic, but each one of them has his own vocabulary. In other words, the word "ثب", according to the king's dialect, means "to sit down", but, according to the man's dialect, it means "to jump."

In consequence, it is commonly known that «مَنْ دَخَلَ ظَفَارَ حَمْرٍ، أَي تَكَلَّمَ بِلَهْجَةِ حَمِيرٍ» (he who enters the village of *Dhafar* will speak the language of the people of *Hemyar*). Similarly, in English, it is known that "when you are in Rome do as Romans do." That is to say, when you leave your country and move into another one, you should acquire the customs and traditions of the new destination.

Here, Schneidmesser (1980) indirectly supports the issue of synonymy. He defends the existence of synonymy in natural languages because he believes that synonymous words result from "the different dialects and the different regions where each word is commonly used" (Sulhī 17). For example, he says that 'purse', 'billfold', 'wallet', 'pocketbook', and 'handbag' are synonymous in American English.

Similarly, there are many famous linguists, who argue for the existence of synonymy and defend it in English. For example, Ullmann (1962:153) mentions the reasons why we use synonymy, as follows:

- 1) People like to hear good words in succession and it causes a flow of synonyms.
- 2) Poets use synonyms motivated by the exigencies of metre.
- 3) A collection of synonyms could produce a contrast effect either serious or humorous.
- 4) Synonymy is used to correct one's use of words when one wishes to replace a word by a more appropriate one.
- 5) When a poet tries to formulate his thoughts and ideas, he may put in his text all the various synonyms that come to his mind.

Sulhī (2003) comments on the previous list; he criticizes Ullmann's view because he believes that Ullmann's use of synonyms is "generally for stylistic purposes rather than for a real need" (16). According to Sulhī, only the fourth reason in the previous list "can represent a level of real need for the use of synonymy other than a stylistic one" (ibid.).

Furthermore, Vasudevan (1996:69) defends the existence of synonymy. He lists the other stylistic values for the use of synonymy; for example, he says that a synonym may:

- 1) approximate most to the meaning,
- 2) add to the beauty of meaning,
- 3) carry figurative beauty along with it,
- 4) contribute to a new lease of excellence,
- 5) hint at a meaning almost not plausible to be imagined about the object under description,
- 6) contain figurative elements conducive to beauty.

5.2 Evidence for the Existence of Synonymy

The advocates of the existence of synonymy, including some of the Arab scholars, provide some evidence to prove and support their view (Salem 12-13), as follows:

- 1- They believe that if every word has a sense (meaning) that differs from that of another word, it will be impossible to replace words. For example, we say that "لا ريب فيه" means "لا شك فيه". Thus, if the meaning of "الريب" differs from the meaning of "الشك", we cannot describe them as synonymous words and then they are noninterchangeable. It is also known that the two phrases have the same meaning, since they are mutually used.
- 2- Arabic poetry abounds in synonyms. It is argued that different words having the same meaning in a given context appear in poetry for the sake of emphasis, variety of expressions and hyperbole. For example, the Arab poet, Al-Ḥafīʿah says:

ألا حَبْدًا هَنْدُ وَأَرْضُ ُ بِهَا هَنْدُ ... وَهَنْدُ أَتَى مِنْ دُونِهَا النَّأْيُ وَالْبَعْدُ

Here, "النأي" and "البعء" are synonymous because both of them mean isolation (Ibn Faris 115).

- 3- It is also argued that Arabic prose is rich in synonymy; some prominent narrators, like Al-'Aṣma'ī, abundantly mentioned various examples. For example, in prose, it is narrated that Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) told Abū Hurayrah to bring him "السكين" (the knife). Then, Abū Hurayrah turned right and left three times and said: "Do you want 'المدينة' (the knife)?" The Prophet (pbuh) replied: "Yes." Abū Hurayrah said: "Do you call it 'سكين'?" By Allah! I had never heard it until today"⁴ (Translation is mine).

5.3 Advocates of the Non-Existence of Synonymy

On the contrary, some ancient Arab linguists, like Abū Helāl Al-'Askarī, Ibn Faris (d. 395/1004), Ibn Al-'Arabī (1964), and Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143), deny the existence of synonymy in natural languages in general and in the Glorious Qur'ān in particular.

Another advocate of the non-existence of synonymy in natural languages is B. De Jonge (1993), a modern linguist, who assures that "it is illegal and even undesirable to suppose that synonymy could exist, since this existence would imply an unnecessary and uneconomical expansion of the set of units" (523). He rejects the concept of synonymy and calls for finding out the differences between seemingly related expressions. In addition, he insists on finding the *raison d'être* for "their difference of meaning" (ibid.).

Taylor (1954) also describes the concept of synonymy as dogmatic, mythical and untenable. He denies the existence of synonymy for three reasons:

- 1- It would be impossible to explain to anyone what synonymy is, because any attempt at clarifying it would presuppose his capacity to recognize it.
- 2- It is impossible ever to explicate the notion of the sameness of something else, itself in need of a criterion, and,
- 3- It is impossible, owing to the peculiar nature of understanding, to give any criterion either for sameness or for difference of meaning.

In addition, Ibn Faris (d. 395/1004: 114) denies the existence of synonymy and argues against it. He provides evidence to prove that such a phenomenon does not exist in the Arabic language. According to him, synonymy is nothing but a false assumption because people do not differentiate between substantives, such as *السيف*, and attributes, such as *المهند* and *الحسام*. To explain, we can say that *السيف* is the only substantive and the rest are only attributes (adjectives) that differ from one another.

Similarly, Muḥammad Al-Mubarak (1964) emphasizes that synonymy looks like a plague because each word has its own meaning. So, he rejects the occurrence of synonyms despite the defense of the other trend, i.e. the advocates of the existence of synonymy. Al-Mubarak also believes that there are nuances or shades of meaning between alleged synonyms. Obviously, he adopts the same opinion of Ibn Faris (d. 395/1004) and others, who call for denying such a phenomenon. According to him, such false assumptions affected the process of thinking itself and then led to the disappearance of minute differences between semantically related words that are falsely called synonyms; as a result, these alleged synonyms are commonly used in that sense. In addition, according to him, these words lost their original meanings, and thus we feel caught between reality and illusion. He attributes such mental uneasiness or confusion to the absence of the distinguishing characteristics and essential differences between words, resulting in adopting repetitive formula and fixed words.

In a consequence, Al-Mubarak supports the view of those who reject the existence of synonymy in natural languages, especially those who looked for the differences between words and differentiated between them semantically and linguistically. According to him, among them are Abū Helal Al-'Askārī (d. 395/1005), who wrote a famous book entitled *Al-Furūq Al-Lughaweyah* (linguistic differences), Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), in his well-known book entitled *Adab Al-Kātib* (letters of the writer), and Al-Tha'alebī (d. 429/1038), in his distinguished dictionary entitled *Fiqh Al-Lughah Wa Aṣrār Al-'Arabeyah* (philology and the secrets of Arabic) (318-19).

Furthermore, Al-Shaye' (1993) argues against the occurrence of synonymy; he justifies his point of view, as follows:

- 1- If we have two similar expressions, then it is natural that one of them will be commonly used more than the other.
- 2- It is preferable in natural languages to economize in sending and receiving messages, but synonymy maximizes.
- 3- It is easy for one's memory to store one expression (that is) related to one object instead of two.
- 4- Synonymous words are not substantives but attributes instead.

Similarly, 'Abdel-Raḥmān (2004) rejects the occurrence of synonymy, especially in the Glorious Qur'ān. She believes that each word, if not each letter, cannot be replaced or interchanged by other words (or letters) because each one is used in the right place.

In this regard, Al-Khattabī (d. 388/988) says that if each word is replaced by another one, either the meaning will change and then ambiguity will take place, or its beauty will diminish and the rhetoric will disappear (26).

Salem believes that the proponents of the non-existence of synonymy have their own evidence. According to him, they do not deny the richness of any language, especially Arabic, but they look at synonymous words as words that are different in meaning. Additionally, he assures that only a talented and a competent scholar is able to notice minute differences between alleged synonyms (17).

5.4 Evidence for the Non-Existence of Synonymy

The advocates of the non-existence of synonymy in natural languages look at synonymous words as alleged synonyms; their belief is strongly based on the following evidence:

- 1- What we call synonyms are just attributes and not substantives. According to Ibn Faris (d. 395/1004), "A substantive is just one, e.g. السيف (sword), and the other ones are only attributes that differ from each other" (114-16). Additionally he says that the following verbs, i.e. مضى / ذهب / انطلق / قعد / جلس and رقد / نام / هجع are not synonymous because the meaning of قعد differs from that of جلس. As for the meaning of the former, we say, for example, "So-and-so قام and then قعد", but as for the meaning of the latter, we say: "So-and-so was مضطجع and then جلس." So القعود results from القيام and الجلوس, from الاضطجاع (ibid).
- 2- They disagree that the meaning of "لا ريب فيه" is similar to that of "لا شك فيه"; they believe that the meanings of the two expressions are not synonymous because each one of them has a special meaning that does not exist in the other. (Salem 14)

Additionally, they deny repetition and tautology in Arabic. For instance, they narrate a tale on the authority of Ibn Al-Anbarī showing the adequacy of Arabic. It is narrated that Al-kendy, the famous philosopher, went to Abū Al-'Abbas and said: "There is redundancy in Arabic." Abū Al-'Abbas inquired: "In which situation did you notice that?" The man answered: "I noticeably found the Arabs practice it; for example, they say: "عبد الله قائم, عبد الله قائم, إنَّ عبد الله لقائم and إنَّ عبد الله لقائم". Thus there is redundancy, though the meaning is similar." Then Abū Al-'Abbas commented: "The meanings are different due to the difference in words. To justify, their first statement, i.e. عبد الله قائم, refers to the action of standing, and their second statement, i.e. إنَّ عبد الله قائم, is an answer to a question whereas their final statement, i.e. إنَّ عبد الله لقائم, is a reply to whomever denies that عبد الله is standing"⁵ (Al-Jurjanī 218-19).

Consequently, the repetition of words, especially in Arabic, does not necessarily imply the same meaning. On the surface level, they seem to be redundant or repetitive, but, on the deeper one, they denote a certain kind of meaning. In addition, the previous dialogue shows the ignorance of the inquirer as he lacks the faculty for grasping the Arabic rhetoric.

To conclude, Sulhī (2003:22) justifies the views of both the supporters and the opposers of the existence of synonymy. For example, he says:

- 1- Linguists who reject synonymy only reject absolute synonymy, and most of them agree to partial-synonymy (expressions that share some, but not all, of the shades of meaning); some of them even find in synonymy a rich stylistic value.
- 2- Linguists who defend synonymy tend to have a contemporary functional look rather than a historical analytical view of the differences between synonyms.

In addition, Sulhī sums up the criteria for synonymy, as follows:

- 1- The criterion for synonymy is the interchangeability in certain contexts and not in all contexts, in other words no free substitution.
- 2- Another criterion is readers' and hearers' reaction to the use of the linguistic expression in certain contexts. (ibid)

6. Conditions for Synonymy

The advocates of the existence of synonymy in natural languages do not arbitrarily defend it. In other words, they do not argue for the absolute occurrence of synonyms, but they admit their conditional occurrence. To explain, they put some certain conditions for the occurrence of synonymy. For instance, Al-Razī (d. 478/1085) did not oppose or reject the occurrence of synonymy, especially in the presence of some conditions, i.e. to know the difference between a substantive and its definition, and a substantive and its attribute. For example, there is a difference between السكين, as a substantive, and its definition, as a tool used for cutting materials. Similarly, there is a difference between السيف, as a substantive, and its attributes, as الحسام, الصارم, and المهند.

In this regard, Anīs (1965) mentions some certain conditions that are necessary for the occurrence of synonymy in accordance with the views of the modern linguists, as follows:

- 1- The two synonymous words should have full sameness of meaning, at least, in the mind of the majority of those who live in the same environment.
- 2- The two synonymous words should be united by the linguistic environment, that is to say, they should belong to one dialect or a harmonious group of dialects.
- 3- The two synonymous words should be united by a period of time as the modernists look at synonyms at a particular era.
- 4- One of the two synonymous words should not be a result of phonemic development of the other (Anīs 179-80).⁶ For example, the word ألقع is conventionally developed to be ألدغ, and الزواج, to be الجواز.

Lyons (1995:61) also admits the occurrence of full synonyms if they satisfy some certain criteria. He defines two expressions as full synonyms if the following conditions are met:

- "All their meanings are identical".
- They are "synonymous in all contexts".
- They are "semantically equivalent in all dimensions of meaning."

In addition to the above-mentioned conditions, other conditions will be discussed in detail, as follows:

1- Interchangeability

It means that the two synonymous words can be mutually used. In other words, they should be interchangeable, otherwise they are not synonymous. In this regard, Gertrude Ezorsky (1959) puts a special emphasis on the importance of interchangeability criterion for determining synonymy. She says: "Two expressions are synonymous in a language (L) if, and only if, they may be interchanged in each sentence in L without altering the truth value of that sentence" (536-38).

2- Truth Conditions

It means that the interpretation of the two expressions depends on their truth conditions. In other words, if the two expressions have different truth conditions, they give different interpretation. For instance, the two words, i.e. الخوف and الخشية, seem to be synonymous, but, in fact, they are not, because الخشية, which is derived from the Arabic clause "شجرة خشية" (a hard or dried tree), is more comprehensive and more powerful than الخوف. Another difference between them is that الخشية results from the power and grandeur of the person you fear, even if you are strong, but الخوف means the frailty of the fear, even if the person or thing you fear is more simple (Salem: 40).

3- Identical Interpretation

It means that the two synonymous expressions should have identical interpretation, otherwise they cannot be interchangeable. For example, according to Abū Ishāq Al-Nahwī, there is no difference between the verbs ختم and طبع (Salem 113). Some exegetes believe that the two verbs are semantically identical because they are similarly mentioned in the Glorious Qurʾān, as follows:

(خَتَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَى سَمْعِهِمْ وَعَلَى أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشَاوَةً وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ) (البقرة/ 17)
 (أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ طَبَعَ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ وَسَمْعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَارِهِمْ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْغَافِلُونَ) (النحل/ 108)

According to Harris (1973), the appropriate interpretation of words is "determined [first] by features of the communication situation known to participants in that situation" (125) and second by the features of the linguistic context. As for the features of the communication situation, the story of the Yemeni King, Zee Jaden, mentioned earlier, is a good example of inappropriate interpretation of the word ثب. The two participants of that situation misunderstand each other because the King, on saying ثب, means 'to sit down', but the addressee, the man from the tribe of Banu Kelab, misunderstands the command of the King on jumping from the roof downward. According to the people of Nazār, an ancient Arab tribe, 'الوثب' means jumping downward." That is why, the King astonishingly said: "Indeed, our Arabic differs from theirs" (Al-Saleh 300).

As for the features of the linguistic context, Harris (1973) gives some examples of the word 'paper' to show that its appropriate interpretation depends upon the complement of the sentence. For instance, he says that the word *paper* may mean either of two meanings, i.e. newspaper or essay.

Ex: Professor Jones is reading his *paper*

/ \
 essay newspaper

According to Harris (1973), the professor may be engaged in one of two activities, namely "(i) addressing a learned society, or (ii) catching up on the day's news" (124). Here, the interpretation of *paper* is not clear because it may be interpreted as either *newspaper* or *essay*. But such an uncertainty does not arise if "the rest of the sentence makes the appropriate interpretation clear" (ibid). Below he gives some examples of such cases, as follows:

The *paper* ceased publication → newspaper

The *paper* was on the mating habits of the giraffe → essay

4- Co-extensiveness

It means that if two expressions are commonly extensive and comprehensive, we may count them as context-bound synonyms. On the contrary, if such a condition changes, the two expressions are no longer synonymous. For example, القراءة and التلاوة seem to be synonymous and interchangeable, but there are some shades of meaning between them. They differ from each other, namely

pragmatically and contextually. As for the differences between them, the word تلاوة means, according to Al-Aṣfahanī, “the ability to understand the meaning of the verses while reciting them.” For example, it reads:

﴿الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَتْلُونَهُ حَقَّ تِلَاوَتِهِ أُولَئِكَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ﴾ (البقرة / 121)

According to Al-Jalālayn, famous exegetes, *حق التلاوة* means “the true reciting of the (Holy) Book as It is revealed.” But Shehab Al-Dīn Al-Qaṣṭalānī (d. 923/1517) adds the following: “تلاوة القرآن حق تلاوته” means “Reciting (the verses of the Holy Qurʾān) correctly, understanding their meanings and following their teachings” (327).

According to Al-ʿAskarī (d. 395/1005), *التلاوة* means reciting more than two words but *القراءة* means reading one word only. In addition, Al-Aṣfahanī adds another dichotomy between them; he believes that *التلاوة* is more specific than *القراءة* and every *تلاوة* is *قراءة* but not vice versa.

5- Semantic Equivalence

It means that the formal meaning of two expressions agrees with the contextual one, namely "in various formal relations into which a form enters" (Catford 11) and "in relevant situational features with which it is related" (ibid 12). For example, *حلف* and *أقسم* are two synonymous verbs in Arabic, meaning "to swear." They are mentioned in the following verses:

﴿وَأَقْسَمُوا بِاللَّهِ جَهْدَ أَيْمَانِهِمْ لَئِنْ جَاءَتْهُمْ آيَةٌ لَيُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهَا﴾ (الأنعام / 109)

﴿وَلَيَخْلِفَنَّ إِنَّ أَرَدْنَا إِلَّا الْحُسْنَىٰ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّهُمْ لَكَاذِبُونَ﴾ (التوبة / 107)

According to the prominent philologist Ibn Mandhūr (d. 711/1311), in *Lisān Al-ʿArab Lexicon*, “الحلف and الحلف” means “القسَمَ”. This means that the two verbs are linguistically identical. Thus, the two verbs satisfy such a criterion in that sense.

6- Investigating the Opposites

Some linguists believe that investigating the opposites is very essential to determine whether the two expressions are synonymous or not. In addition, this criterion is considered one of the most distinguishing features of synonyms. For example, it is allegedly thought that *قعد* and *جلس* are synonymous, but, in fact, they are not. If you investigate their opposites, you will find that they are different from each other. As for the former, its opposite is *قام* while the opposite of the latter is *اضطجع* (Ibn Faris 114-16). These differences cannot be realized by an ordinary reader, but by a specialist or by a linguist. Thus, investigating the opposites leads to determining the truth conditions of alleged synonyms.

7- Differentiate between Synonyms

Here, W. E. Collinson (1939: 61-62) lists nine possible differentiae by which he distinguishes between alleged synonyms, as follows:

- 1- One term is more general and inclusive in its applicability, another is more specific and exclusive, e.g. *refuse/reject*. Cf. *seaman/sailor, ending/inflexion, go on foot/march*.
- 2- One term is more intense than another, e.g. *repudiate/reject*. Cf. *immense/great, towering/tall*.
- 3- One term is highly charged with emotion than another, e.g. *repudiate* or *reject/decline*. Cf. *looming/emerging, louring/threatening*.
- 4- One term may imply moral approbation or censure where another is neutral, e.g. *thrifty/economical, eavesdrop/listen*.

- 5- One term is more "professional" than another; e.g. *calcium chloride/chloride of lime/bleaching powder; decease/death; domicile/house; to ordain a priest, institute or induct a vicar, consecrate or instal a bishop/appoint a professor.*
- 6- One term belongs more to the written language; it is more literary than another, e.g. *passing/death*. The literary language includes further distinctions like the poetical and the archaic.
- 7- One term is more colloquial than another, e.g. *turn down/refuse*. The spoken language, too, includes further distinctions like the familiar, slangy and vulgar.
- 8- One term is more local or dialectal than another, e.g. Scots *flesher/butcher, to feu/ to let*.
- 9- One term belongs to child-talk, is used by children or in talking to children, e.g. *daddy, dad, papa/father* (in which different social levels are discernible), *teeny/tiny*, etc.⁷

According to Palmer (1996:89), there are at least five ways to differentiate between possible synonyms, as follows:

- 1- Some sets of synonyms belong to different dialects of the language. For instance, the term 'fall' is used in the United States and in some Western countries of Britain where others would use 'autumn'.
- 2- Some sets of synonyms differ rather in degrees of formality, e.g. 'gentleman', 'man' and 'chap', 'pass away', 'die', and 'pop off'.
- 3- Some words may be said to differ only in their emotive and evaluative meanings, but the remainder of their meaning, i.e. their 'cognitive' meaning, remains the same, e.g. 'politician' and 'statesman', 'hide' and 'conceal', 'liberty' and 'freedom'. The function of such words in language is, of course, to influence attitudes. There are far more subtle ways than saying something is good or bad. Words may have different emotive meanings in different societies. For example, the word 'liberal' is a 'good' word in Great Britain, but it is a 'bad' word in the United States. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to attempt to separate such emotive or evaluative meaning from the 'basic' 'cognitive' meaning of words.
- 4- Some words are collocationally restricted, i.e. they occur only in conjunction with other words. For example, 'rancid' occurs with either *bacon* or *butter*, *addled* with *eggs* or *brains*. This does not seem to be a matter of their meaning, but of the company they keep. It could, perhaps, be argued that these are true synonyms, but they occur in different environments.
- 5- It is obviously the case that many words are close in meaning, or that their meanings overlap. There is, that is to say, a loose sense of synonymy. This is the kind of synonymy that is exploited by the dictionary-marker. For *mature* (adj.), for instance, possible synonyms are *adult*, *ripe*, *perfect* and *due*. For *govern* we may suggest *direct*, *control*, *determine*, *require*. If we look for the synonyms for each of these words themselves, we shall have a further set for each and shall, of course, get further and further away from the meaning of the original word.⁸

Notes

¹ The original reads:

«من قديم شغلت قضية الترادف علماء العربية. واختلفت مذاهبهم فيها. والبيان القرآني يجب أن يكون له القول الفصل فيما اختلفوا فيه، حين يهدي إلى سر الكلمة لا تقوم مقامها كلمة سواها من الألفاظ المقول بترادفها». (209)

² The original reads:

«تضع إحدى القبيلتين أحد الاسمين، والأخرى الاسم الآخر للمسمى الواحد، من غير أن تشعر إحداهما بالأخرى، ثم يشتهر الوضعان .. وهذا مبني على كون اللغات اصطلاحية». (المزهر: 405/1، 406)

³ The original reads:

«وتكاد تجمع كتب الأدب على رواية قصة تعتبر حجة دامغة على صحة ما نميل إليه، فقد خرج رجل من بني كلاب أو من بني عامر بن صعصعة إلى «ذي جدن» من ملوك اليمن فاطَّلَعَ إلى سطح والملك عليه فلما رآه الملك قال له: ثب، يريد «اقعد»، فقال الرجل: ليعلم الملك أنني سامع مطيع، ثم وثب من السطح ودقَّت عنقه، فقال الملك: ما شأنه؟ فقالوا له: أبيت اللعن، إنَّ الوَثْبَ في كلام نزار: الطَّمْرُ، «أي الوثب إلى أسفل»، فقال الملك: ليست عربيتنا كعربيتهم، «مَنْ دَخَلَ ظَفَارَ حَمْرٍ، أي تكلم بلهجة حمير». (دراسات في فقه اللغة: 300)

⁴ Salem (2001: 13) comments:

«ينكر الدكتور أنيس هذا الحديث لأنه لا يتفق مع المنطق لأن السكين وردت في سورة يوسف وهي مكبية والقصة ظهرت وقائعها في المدينة لأن أبا هريرة أسلم في الثانية للهجرة، ولا تتصور أن رجلا متصلا بالقرآن كآبي هريرة وراوي من رواة الحديث يجهل معنى السكين».

⁵ The original reads:

«روي عن ابن الأنباري أنه قال: ركب الكِنْدِيُّ المتفلسف إلى أبي العباس وقال له: إني لأجد في كلام العرب حشواً، فقال له أبو العباس: في أي موضع وجدت ذلك؟
فقال: أجد العرب يقولون: عبد الله قائم، ثم يقولون: إنَّ عبد الله قائم، ثم يقولون: إنَّ عبد الله لقائم، فالألفاظ متكررة والمعنى واحد.
فقال أبو العباس: بل المعاني مختلفة لاختلاف الألفاظ، فقولهم: عبد الله قائم إخبار عن قيامه.
وقولهم: إنَّ عبد الله قائم جواب عن سؤال سائل.
وقولهم: إنَّ عبد الله لقائم جواب عن إنكار منكر قيامه.
فقد تكررت الألفاظ لتكرار المعاني، قال: فما أحرار المتفلسف جواباً، (ويعلق عبد القاهر الجرجاني قائلاً): إذا كان الكِنْدِيُّ يذهب هذا عليه حتى يركب فيه ركوب مُسْتَنَفِّهِمْ أو معترض، فما ظنك بالعامَّة، ومن هو في عداد العامَّة ممن لا يخطر شبه هذا بباله» (دلائل الإعجاز: 218، 219).

⁶ The original reads:

- 1- الاتفاق في المعنى بين الكلمتين اتفاقاً تاماً على الأقل في ذهن الكثرة الغالبة لأفراد البيئة الواحدة.
- 2- الاتحاد في البيئة اللغوية؛ أي أن تكون الكلمتان تنتميان إلى لهجة واحدة، أو مجموعة منسجمة من اللهجات.
- 3- الاتحاد في العصر، فالمحدثون حين ينظرون إلى المترادفات ينظرون إليها في عهد خاص، وزمن معين.
- 4- ألا يكون أحد اللفظين نتيجة تطور صوتي للفظ الآخر. (179 - 180)

⁷ Collinson 1939, pp. 61-62. The analysis is based on that given by Devoto in the article 'Sinonomia' in the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, vol. xxxi, p. 857. (Cf. Baldinger 1970 II, 5)

⁸ I have basically concentrated on the most important points in Palmer's discussion about the five ways by which possible synonyms differ.

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